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ANDERSON MAN PLEADS GUILTY IN CROSS BURNING CASE

SACRAMENTO -- United States Attorney McGregor W. Scott, Anderson Police Chief Neil Purcell, and Federal Bureau of Investigation, Special Agent In Charge (SAC) Keith Slotter announced today that CHRISTOPHER DALE EASELY, 22, of Anderson, California, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to violate civil rights, and interference with housing rights, based on an act of cross burning on the front lawn of an African-American family's home. Sentencing before U.S. District Court Judge Garland E. Burrell was scheduled for September 24, 2004.

This case is the product of a joint investigation by the Anderson Police Department, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

United States Attorney Scott said: "His was a crime of cowardice. Mr. Easley will have many years to reflect on the terror he wrought on an innocent family, and the disgrace he brought the community."

Anderson Police Chief Neil J. Purcell stated: "Our community is very gratified with the resolution of this terrible crime. The federal authorities are to be commended for their swift and firm handling of the EASELY matter. The investigation and prosecution represent a model of local and federal agencies working together to protect our citizens."

SAC Slotter commented: "Civil Rights violations, particularly hate crimes, are a top priority within the FBI. They will not be tolerated, and will be investigated by this office in an aggressive manner."

According to Assistant U.S. Attorneys Benjamin B. Wagner and Matthew C. Stegman, who prosecuted the case, EASELY in his plea of guilty admitted that on the morning of January 2, 2004, he and a juvenile transported a large wooden cross to the home of an African-American family in Anderson, doused it with gasoline, erected it on the front lawn, and set it on fire. He admitted that in doing so, he conspired to intimidate the occupants of the residence because of their race and because they were occupying that dwelling. The juvenile was prosecuted in a separate proceeding, and was previously sentenced on May 4, 2004.

Under the plea agreement, EASELY's sentencing guideline offense level was increased because the offense was a hate crime. It was also increased because he involved a minor in the crime. If EASELY is sentenced in accordance with the plea agreement, he would receive approximately three and a half years in prison, to be followed by three years of formal supervised release. Under federal law, he will be required to serve a minimum of 85% of the prison time imposed. He could also be sentenced to a fine and restitution.

Pursuant to the agreement, at sentencing the United States will move to dismiss a third charge, which had carried a ten year mandatory consecutive sentence. Judge Burrell had previously issued a tentative legal ruling in the case granting a defense motion to dismiss that charge on legal grounds. The U.S. Attorney's Office had opposed the motion, and noted that existing federal case law in this judicial circuit was not settled on the issue.

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